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Settler Colonialism

Thinking with Melissa Gniadek and Beenash Jafri

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ABSTRACT

In "The Times of Settler Colonialism," Melissa Gniadek urges me to go beyond the formulation of settler colonialism conceived as a problem of space. She pushes to further consider how Wolfe's theorization of settler colonialism as structure (not an isolated episode) to examine "not only how histories of invasion do not stop, but also how settler colonialism is defined by multiple, overlapping temporalities." Informed by her own work on nineteenth century American literature and its representations of the temporal dimensions of settler colonialism, Gniadek extends my focus on "enduring indigeneity" to go beyond the question of *where* is settler colonialism to ask, *when* is settler colonialism?, thus examining settler colonialism as a historical process that is ongoing. Gniadek further seeks to "highlight the disruptive temporal potential embedded in recognizing settler colonialism as a structure that needs to be considered in relation to questions of indigeneity." Moreover, Gniadek explains that her aim is to underscore how the "temporal dimensions of settler colonialism involve movement in multiple directions and how recognizing the multiple temporal nodes of settler colonialism might point to additional ways for disciplines to speak to each other around reconceptions of temporalities." One example is the historical narratives settlers craft to legitimate their occupation while also "negotiating evidence of other times and claims to those spaces" such as archaeological explanations of explorations and even civilizations that predate the ancestors of present-day Indigenous peoples, and thus aim to challenge and contain Native claims. As such, she importantly asserts, "structures of settler colonialism not only endure, but in their most fundamental manifestations are always moving between pasts, presents, and imagined futures." Consequently, offering valuable insight, Gniadek illuminates the temporal dimensions of settler colonialism that move beyond (my) simply asserting that settler colonialism and indigeneity endure into the present.

In "Ongoing Colonial Violence in Settler States," Beenash Jafri offers a different route and context for contemporary work in settler colonial studies that makes visible some prior and important intellectual work and distinct stakes for those engaged in queer/feminist of color and decolonizing research and activism. Jafri suggests that settler colonial studies became institutionalized through Lorenzo Veracini's *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (2010) and Veracini's launching of the journal *Settler Colonial Studies* (2011), while her own point of engagements were located in earlier critical race and Indigenous studies. Jafri takes up select works by critical race and Native feminist scholars that preceded what she sees as the institutionalized formation of settler colonial studies as a field, addressing intertwined forms of colonial and racialized violence, and highlighting the

role of white supremacy in nationalist practices and mythologies. For example, Jafri looks at how Sherene Razak has theorized settler society in a way that does not posit that settler colonialism is “a structure, not an event,” but that entails the continued repetition of colonial violence and relationship based on colonial domination. Jafri makes a firm distinction between works such as Razak’s (along with those produced by Lee Maracle, Bonita Lawrence, et al.) and settler colonial studies in its current form by suggesting that the interventions emerging from critical race and Indigenous studies focus on how ongoing colonization works as it manifests through institutions, discourses, ideologies, and practices—rather than describing what settler colonialism looks like. She further suggests that the difference lies in the starting point of each, and that for the works emerging from critical race and Indigenous studies the “intellectual, political, and ethical commitments were to confront that violence, rather than to better understand settler colonialism per se.” Her point is very important and well taken—especially in order to avoid re-centering the settlers at the expense of those subject to their violence, and to actively promote decolonization (and not by merely by pointing to Indigenous resistance, either). Yet, Jafri also acknowledges how theoretical work such as Wolfe’s offers a useful framework with clear parameters, which may embolden scholarly and activist contentions that colonization is ongoing.

I would like to add here, though, that Wolfe’s work did more than that, in that he offered us a theory of settler colonialism through careful historical work that is comparative—notably bringing Australia, the USA, and Israeli-Palestine into the same frame—to enable the analytical distinctions between it and franchise colonialism (not just because of its operative logic of “the elimination of the native,” but through its attendant practices that logic ushers). More specifically, Wolfe’s theory of structural genocide enables an understanding of how settler colonialism manifests. In other words, I do not think Wolfe’s work is limited to describing what settler colonialism looks like (as it differs from other forms of colonialism), but that he also showed how it is violently enacted through institutions’ structures, discourses, ideologies, and practices. And because of this, I find the discrepancy Jafri draws “between arguing that colonization is ongoing, and arguing that colonization is a structure” to be curious since it is arguably ongoing *because* it is formidable structure. She goes on to say that the former emphasizes “the continual reenactment of colonization, whereas the latter emphasizes the totalizing effects of originary violence, emphasizing colonization’s erasures”—and that “there are political-ethical implications to highlighting one over the other.” However, I do not think that Wolfe emphasizes one over the other since his theory highlights the productive nature of settler colonialism—what it creates in order to replace, not just how it destroys. And because of that, his work need not preclude crucial examinations of how colonial violence is racialized, gendered, and sexualized. That he accounted for the racial grammar of settler colonialism indicates the suppleness of his theory—even as he did not go further to take up how gender and sexuality work in these contexts. My point is that Wolfe’s work does not foreclose these lines of inquiry (though some readings of him might do just that), though I agree that it is extremely important to account for the earlier work of Native scholars and scholars of color in theorizing the intricate workings of colonial violence. Jafri’s related point—that highlighting the repetition of colonial violence may enable the centering of Indigenous peoples—is also well taken. But Wolfe understood that to be the work of Indigenous studies (especially in accounting for Indigenous resistance), a field he understood as distinct from settler colonial studies—which is what my own essay strove to examine (the differences between the two). And that also means—as Jafri demonstrates—that settler colonial studies as a field is distinct from critical race studies, feminist studies, queer of color critique, and more.

In closing, I want to acknowledge that Jafri's alternate lineage is extremely important—and to return to another genealogy that I offered in a footnote of my original essay. That is, that settler colonialism was theorized early on in the Palestinian and Hawaiian contexts. And, although the scholars I mention in that note did not offer a grand theory like Wolfe's (or even Varacini's, which also differs substantially from Wolfe's), given that they were not comparative works, it is perhaps because they document and theorize *both* the continual reenactment of colonization and the totalizing effects settler colonial projects intend (but never fully achieve due to enduring indigeneity), that I question the assertion that settler colonial studies emphasizes colonization's erasures over the continual reenactment of colonization.

 [Bio](#)



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